

goodnight n go by kittenCorrosion

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Summary:

"Oh, why'd you have to be so cute?
It's impossible to ignore you, ah
Why must you make me laugh so much?
It's bad enough we get along so well
Just say goodnight and go"

~

Jane only lets herself daydream about the cute barista who works across the street. But then the daydream ends up asleep on her couch on a snowy December night. Will she say goodnight and let her chance slip away?

1. Verse

Author's Note:

obviously heavily influenced by ariana grande's "goodnight n go". it just kind of came to me and i spent three days obsessively writing it so here it is.

i meant it to be a one shot, but it felt better to divide it up into chapters.

FORGIVE THE ERRORS. i was kind of rushing so it's not as well edited as i like but i'm just eager to post it so please know i'm going to see every type and grammatical error and want to punch myself in the face haha.

anyways i hope you like it.

Jane had only taken half a step into the bookstore, the bell ringing cheerfully, before she felt her foot hit something solid and furry, tripping to try and keep from crushing any tiny paws she knew would be underfoot. She yelped, ankles twisting, and fell straight forward onto her knees. Her hands tried to catch herself automatically, but instead ended up smashing her iced chai latte right into the hardwood floor.

A furry grey and white face immediately started to lap up the sweet milky liquid and Jane groaned, glaring at the feline offender.

"Pippin! That's the third time this week," she scolded. "Why do you always attack *me*?"

There was a snicker up ahead at the counter and Max came around the front holding some paper towels, her red hair tangling around her arms as she bent down to help mop up the mess. They shooed the naughty cat away and then Jane stood up with a pained moan, rubbing her sore knees.

"He really does have it out for you," Max empathized. "I'm not sure

why. Benny said he's always been wily but..."

"It's because I had to chase him away from that lady with the allergies my first day. He's never forgiven me."

"You're probably right."

The two young women grinned at each other for a moment before Jane looked down at her now empty cup with a sad sigh. She hadn't even taken a sip yet.

Max however, looked too gleeful at her friend's misfortune, glancing out the window across the street from where they were to where a sign for "The Quarry Coffee" was lit up, the coffeeshop glowing warmly in the mid-October chill. Even from here, Jane could make out the shapes of the baristas behind the counter, buzzing around, pressing espresso and foaming lattes, passing over the white cups to their customers.

She could see *him*, his tall figure and mop of dark hair bobbing between the register and the coffee grinder and espresso machine. Despite her best attempt to keep her cool—which never seemed to work no matter how hard she tried—her heart flip-flopped in her chest. For the past year since she'd started working at Mirkwood Books and first became a patron at the Quarry, she'd had the same reaction when he turned to her and smiled and said, "Iced chai latte, right?"

All she knew was that his name was Mike and he was friendly and helpful and so fucking cute she wanted to scream.

Today one of the others had taken her order, accidentally making a regular hot chai instead of her preferred iced, and she hadn't even cared because he didn't notice her the whole time she'd been there. It was hopeless, a dumb, childish, crush, but she couldn't pretend like there wasn't something about him that made her feel soft and warm and perfect.

And maybe, just maybe, someday he would smile that cute as fuck smile at her and ask her if she wanted to go to dinner. And then if she wanted to be his girlfriend. And then an engagement—

“Guess you’ll have to go and get another, huh?” Max’s voice broke Jane’s lovely dream, a smirk twisting her face into a picture of smugness. “What a shame.”

Jane immediately turned pink. “No, stop. Don’t start,” she begged. “I shouldn’t have told you, it was stupid.”

“Go get another drink or I’ll walk over there and tell him just how much you lov—”

She was already out the door, fuming as Max’s shoulders shook with laughter. Max was pretty much her best friend. They’d both been freshmen and had met at orientation. Jane didn’t really trust people, it was kind of a problem, but Max’s openness about her own rough childhood and her easy acceptance and fun personality... it had been exactly what Jane had needed back then. Now, they were starting their third year, a few months in, and so far Jane’s life had never been better.

She had a cool apartment—rented to her by her dad’s friend, Benny, who also owned the bookstore. He was a big, friendly guy, missing her dad’s gruffness and rough edges but similar enough to keep the homesickness at bay. She had her own little space just a block from the store, periwinkle walls and fairy lights, just like her room at home, with a cozy couch for reading and doing homework in front of the TV, a kitchen to make tea, and a single bathroom.

It was *home*. Something she hadn’t always had before her dad had taken her in.

A best friend, a safe place to live, and a dream job. Not to mention school, which was going as well as she could have hoped. Everything in her life was falling into place... finally.

She sighed, her breath a white puff in the fall chill, looking across the street at the coffee shop and then over her shoulder one more time before crossing. It wasn’t that late, but the sun set early as winter crept through autumn’s bright leaves, the streetlights shining a path for her to follow. When she stepped inside there was a delicious wave of warmth, full of the smell of coffee grounds and steeping tea. There was no line for once and she headed for the register, trying to keep

from glancing around, knowing better than to even get her hopes up.

“Hey.”

Her eyes, which had been staring at the Star Wars themed tip jar, glanced up and she tried to keep from melting into the floor as *he* stood before her. She glanced at his nametag, “Mike”, and then let her eyes meet his, feeling like she was floating but also falling at the same time, the inky depths as comforting as a cup of dark roast, no cream or sugar needed.

“Iced chai latte, right?” His familiar handsome smile struck her dumb. “The usual?”

“Yeah, I...” she swallowed, trying to chill the fuck out. “I was just here like ten minutes ago but Pippin tripped me and it sort of ended up on the floor.”

“Pippin?” His perfect eyebrows drew together in the most beautiful question mark she’d ever seen.

“Yeah, he’s a cat. Not my cat,” she quickly added, gesturing behind her towards the bookstore. “My boss’s cat. He has four.”

Mike blinked for a second, obviously trying to make sense of what she’d said as he stared at the sign of the store across the street. He suddenly grinned so brightly she was sure she would go blind.

“Wait wait, let me guess. Pippin, Merry, Frodo and Sam?”

“What gave it away?” She laughed easily, the nerves slowly dissipating.

So far it had been the longest conversation they’d ever had, but instead of feeling terrified she felt more and more at ease, his easygoing attitude comforting. Usually she was too emotionally challenged to do more than smile and say thanks, but something about today was different.

His gaze flicked behind her towards her place of employment again, an amused expression slanting his face.

“What gave it away?” He tilted his head, playful friendliness lighting his eyes like midnight stars. “I have no clue but, huh, if you’re from Mirkwood, that makes you a wood elf. How’s Legolas?”

“He’s doing great, actually. Or his cardboard cutout is. He lives in the back room and scares the shit out of my every time I have to restock.”

Mike had been leaning against the counter toward her but at that he doubled back and let out a laugh. It sounded how drinking hot chocolate felt, sweet and heady with a warmth that filled her chest. She was sure she was blushing, cheeks bright pink. It took him a second to calm down enough to talk again, and then he leaned back across the counter towards her, still smiling that heartachingly gorgeous smile.

“You’re pretty funny, Eleven.”

“Eleven?” It was a breath that left her.

A hint of a flush brightened his cheeks. “Oh, yeah. You always come in at eleven and get your chai... it just—I mean, it’s always at eleven. You’re the eleven o’clock.”

She let herself snort in amusement despite how much her heart was fluttering and her brain was screaming that, *he knows who you are! Sort of!*

It made sense. She always popped in after her Early British Literature class, before her shift at Mirkwood started. But she didn’t think he would have noticed.

“Do I really—” she started.

“Mike!” The other barista on duty, the one with curly hair and a toothy grin, interrupted them, looking between the two. “Are you taking her order or annoying her?” Right then the door dinged, announcing more customers and—Dustin, that was what his nametag said—jerked his chin towards them. “Chop chop!”

Mike ducked his head and quickly rang her up, the conversation totally killed by Dustin, and she tried to think of a way to revive it as

she payed, unsure of what to say now. She desperately wanted to keep talking to him, about anything, but every intelligent thought left her mind and instead she stared down at her hand as he passed her change back, pausing to assess the tip jar and then dropping the dollar and few coins into the “Jedi” side. When she glanced up he was biting his lip, eyes watching her, but quickly turned away to make her drink.

With a sigh she wandered further down the counter, away from the small line that had formed behind her as Dustin took Mike’s place at the register. She tried not to be weird and stare, but couldn’t help but watch as he mixed up her chai and milk, surprised to see him add a pump of something. He looked up and smiled, making her heart do that thing crazy thing again, and then leaned over to hand it to her.

Their fingers brushed as she took the cup.

“I added a pump of something, and if you can guess the flavor, next one is on me,” he said, eyes dancing. “But if you hate it, tell me and I’ll make you new one right now.”

She took a sip, the usual sweet flavor washing over her tongue with an added note, of something a little... flowery? Her brow puckered and she took another sip.

“Is that... lavender?” she guessed. Her dad had bought her some perfume one time and it had been lavender. It tasted how it smelled.

Mike’s face lit up. “Yeah! Well, damn, I thought I’d picked a tough one. Guess your next one is free.”

Jane couldn’t help but beam.

“Mike!” It was Dustin again, looking exasperated. “Dude, there’s a line.”

“Just a second!” He hissed, before turning back to Jane, his face a messy apology. “Remind me next time you come in tomorrow, Eleven.” The lopsided grin was back.

“O-Okay,” she managed, lost in his eyes and his dreamy smile once again. “Bye.”

“See you!” He shot her one last smile over his shoulder as he headed back to the register.

Jane felt rooted to floor, the sweet taste of flowers and tea on her tongue, her chest and face flushing with warmth. *Eleven*. She’d been called worse things. And the fact that he remembered her, her order and her face... it was more than she’d hoped for in their casual, everyday interaction. He knew who she was. He *knew*.

The only other thought that danced in her head as she skipped back to work, floating through the air, was, “*This crush is getting out of control.*”

&&&

Mirkwood Books was a magical place. The bookshelves were painted brown, with whorls and holes, like the bark on actual trees, going up to the ceiling that was criss-crossed with forest green leaves, fake branches that tangled over the black ceiling, dotted with tiny sparkling stars. Signs proclaiming genre hung from the ends of the shelves, written in both English and Sindarin. The staircase that went down to the basement level was surrounded by a familiar gate. “Speak ‘friend’ and enter”, it read, the stairs leading down to a brick chasm, full of more bookcases. Occasional squishy armchairs hid in the corners and cracks, some claimed by purring cats, others bare and ready for a new explorer to venture their way.

Jane had been lucky her dad and Benny were old friends, from high school, and when he’d asked the big man to look out for his daughter, he’d gone above and beyond to help her feel at home. Her pleading eyes had too easily convinced him to add Max to the ranks and the hidden gem of a bookshop had gone from a way to earn grocery money to being one of her favorite places in the whole world.

It really did feel like magic, the walls cozy and warm, the bookshelves strong and protective, the customers regular and friendly.

Sitting at the front desk, she worked on her research paper for West and the World, occasionally popping downstairs to the Industry section to borrow a book for research. Most of the customers who

came in were similar, students from campus needing sources for their papers or theses or projects. Occasionally one would buy a book, but for the most part the armchairs were full of exhausted young people just trying to pass their class. It was like a tired truce, an odd community, and Jane loved it.

Of course there were plenty of community customers who came and purchased books, perusing the New Arrivals shelf or buying a new book of poetry or another issue of their favorite comic. It was a beautiful wonderland that she was allowed to live in.

Currently she was reorganizing the Mystery shelf, which somehow could never seem to stay in alphabetical order. It had been raining, chilly autumn rain, but she had a warm chai sitting at the front desk to keep her warm.

She couldn't help but glance toward it, the side turned toward her that read, "Eleven :)". He always called her that and somehow she was starting to think of herself more of an Eleven than Jane. Especially when he accompanied it with that smile.

Ugh, stop. She'd been thinking about it for the past three weeks since she'd first dared to strike up that conversation. And it was getting ridiculous. *He's just being nice. You're a customer. A surefire way to get a good tip.*

And besides, she didn't have time to be interested in anyone. Her grades at midterm hadn't been as outstanding as she'd hoped, and she couldn't afford to let her GPA drop. If she lost her scholarship, she would have to go home to her dad with no degree and no ideas and even though she knew he loved her and would welcome her back, she wanted to do this for him. And to prove to herself that she wasn't all the terrible things she'd been called as a child. That she had worth and purpose.

She needed to succeed.

So no, romance was not important. She had school, she had work, and she had Max to come over and watch movies and eat chinese takeout with and occasionally cuddle with if she was in a mood. She didn't *need* anything more.

But that didn't keep her heart from racing every time she stepped into the Quarry, didn't keep her from smiling back when Mike met her at the register, didn't keep her from happily chatting as he rang in her order by memory. Nothing could seem to stop that.

The bell at the front dinged, but Jane currently had two armfuls of Agatha Christie and didn't bother to see who had come in, balancing a stack with her chin as she tried to carefully move back down the stepladder.

Tried being the key word.

The toe of her Converse caught on the step and her whole foot tipped up, her balance lost as her body started to fall backwards. A soft cry left her throat as she felt herself falling, quickly cut off by a soft gasp as two hands planted firmly on her back, catching her and pushing her back onto the stepladder firmly. It took her a second to recapture the breath she'd lost at the fright and she breathlessly looked over her shoulder to thank her savior.

It was Mike.

"Hey, Eleven," he smiled, looking devastatingly handsome in a button up with a navy hoodie over it, different from the apron he usually wore. He had a book bag over his shoulder, his dark flopping out from under the hood of his jacket and into his eyes, his bangs damp from the rain. From her place on the stepladder she was taller than him, and the way he looked up at her immediately had her heart tap dancing in her chest.

Fuck, why did he have to be so *cute*?

"Oh, hi," she managed, sucking another breath and trying to calm. "Um, thanks for saving my life."

He reached for the stack of books to help her but she shook her head and instead he kept an arm out as she tried going down the ladder again, much more carefully. She set the paperbacks down on the floor and then took a second to swing her arms around, getting the feeling back into her hands and trying to think of something to say.

Right then, Pippin appeared, followed closely behind by Merry, and the two cats went straight to Mike, purring and rubbing on his jeans. His face lit up and he bent down, stroking their heads and scratching their chins until they were both purring so loudly it sounded like someone had started up a small motorboat in the shop.

“Wow, they’re usually picky with customers but they really love you,” Jane said in amazement. “Pippin always tries to trip me when I come in. He’s never forgiven me for being mean on my first day.”

Mike looked up from the cats, grinning. “Really?”

“Yeah, they ignore most people. Sam is the friendly one, but Frodo usually hides anyways so...” She looked around the shop, spotting neither the little brown tabby or the tan tom, figuring they were probably snuggled up together in a cat bed somewhere. She looked back to see Mike stand up and brush at his pants, which were totally coated in white and grey fur. He looked at her beseechingly as the two cats wandered off and she couldn’t hold in a laugh.

“We have a lint roller at the counter, come on,” she nodded, making her way to the counter at the back of the store. “It’s the least I can do since you saved my life.”

“Oh, awesome. Can you show me your Science and Research section next? I need a book on physics.”

“Sure.”

Sciences were all downstairs in the Mine, as they called it, and she lead him through the “gated staircase” to the basement. It wasn’t decorated quite as immersively as the top floor but the walls were black with curved bricking and in the very back corner Benny had managed to find someone to paint the glowing, fiery eyes of the Balrog. Sometimes it creeped her out, when she had to close alone, and once she’d left the lights on, too freaked to have the courage to be in the dark.

“Physics?” She wanted to make sure she hadn’t heard wrong.

“For my senior thesis, I’m talking more about relative physics, like

the energy it would take to make a portal, interdimensional travel, that sort of thing,” he explained mildly as she lead him to the correct section of shelving. “Astrophysics, to be specific but I doubt you have a shelf for that.”

“I’ll ask Benny about adding a subgenre.”

“Cool.”

She noticed a few titles out of order and frowned, reaching to adjust them, feeling the usual satisfaction as everything moved back into its proper place. Once that was done she turned, surprised to find him still right behind her. Close.

He seemed to come out of a daze as she turned and moved back away, his eyes avoiding hers as he ducked out of her way. For a second she considered say something, anything, wanting him to move back to where he’d been.

The sound of footsteps over head and called, “Hello?” reminded her she had other things to do than stare in the dreamy eyes of Mike the barista and apparently physics nerd. She tucked away all the new information he’d given her, into the mental binder covered in heart stickers and girly doodles. She wished she knew more.

“Um, well, let me know if you have any more questions,” she said as she slipped past him, the heady mix of fresh espresso and some sort of aftershave filling her nose.

God, he even *smelled* nice.

Jane tromped up the stairs, annoyed with herself and how much she lacked the ability to show restraint when it came to cute boys.

She spent the next few hours sulking, waiting for it to be ten o’clock so she could close and go home and take a hot bath and hit her pillow and let the soft darkness wash away the anxiety and useless daydreams.

At eight thirty on the dot, she heard thumping footsteps on the stairs. She had been working on her paper, finishing the bibliography so that when she got home she didn’t have anything left to do, but

looked up at the sound automatically, to see if it was someone buying a book.

Mike's dark mop appeared around the corner and Jane quickly looked down, trying to take a deep breath. He approached her desk, eyes aglow, and despite her best efforts to maintain her newfound sense of control, she felt herself melting again.

"Eleven, hey."

It was only two words but the way he said them made her heart twist in her chest. She frowned down at her desk, taking another deep breath, hardening her resolve again. It wasn't fair, maybe, but it was what needed to be done. Looking up, she tried to keep her face slack.

"Yeah?" she managed, hoping he couldn't hear the tremble in her voice.

He blinked at her for a moment. "Um, I'm heading out..."

"Find what you needed?"

"Yeah... I think so." He looked around, gesturing. "My friend has been a here a few times and I always meant to come in but..." That smile was back and she felt her own lips twitch upward. "I'm glad I finally did."

"Yeah," she breathed. "Me too."

There was a moment, a heartbeat, where it was quiet and still. Jane felt herself exhale, a shared breath, a small smile, where she let the ideas and the daydreams and the feeling that filled her heart seep out. Just for a second.

And then Mike bobbed his head, looking pleased, nodding. "Alright. Cool, um, well..." He looked up at her under his dark bangs, lopsided grin in full handsome effect. "Goodnight."

He threw his hood up over his head and made his way out. Jane watched him, as he reached the door, paused, and then pushed out into the rain. Her heart was pounding, every nerve tingling with longing as she watched him disappear into the darkness.

“Goodnight,” she whispered.

Notes for the Chapter:

so i have more than half of the next chapter written but it's late and i'm running low so i need to sleep and try to finish and edit in the morning. i can't promise the chapter tomorrow but i'm sure going to fucking try.

drop me some comments. convince me to hurry my butt up while i still have the motivation. tell me if you like it actually, because some part of me still feels like it's kind of ridiculous and corny. hm.

see you tomorrow (maybe)

-g

2. Bridge

Notes for the Chapter:

me: i should make a cute oneshot based on this song.

also me: WHAT IF instead i ADD A MILLION DETAILS
AND MAKE IT THREE CHAPTERS INSTEAD

like chapter one was ten pages and this one is sixteen
because i lack all self control. someone sedate me.

yeah so i'm a fuckin mess and i don't know why i'm
like this but we've got one more to go. i think it feels
better this way but sorry for taking so long. this is
why i never make promises. i'm no mike, that's for
sure lmao.

Jane knew Max was watching her as she dusted the books and shelves, she could feel her best friend's eyes on her, trying to ignore the accusatory, ice blue stare. It wouldn't change anything, as much as the stubborn redhead thought it would.

"Janie, you know I only say this with love, but you're being a total dumbass," she said resolutely, pushing back from her place at the desk. "He's been coming in twice a week for two months. And you flirt. And you talk. And you laugh at all his dumb jokes."

Jane tensed her shoulders, waiting for it.

"But you *still* won't ask him out you wimp!"

There it was.

She rolled her eyes, continuing to reach with the duster, polishing up the Science Fiction section as she tried to square her shoulders, telling Max what she always told herself.

"He doesn't like me like that. We just talk because he's nice... he makes my chai, I help him find books for his thesis." She sighed, trying to hide her own disappointment. "That's all there is."

“That’s bullshit. He *flirts* with you.”

“He doesn’t. He’s just nice, okay? I’m sure he talks to all the girls who come in to the Quarry like that too. Stop trying to make me... *special*.”

“But—”

Jane whipped around, annoyed with the subject and the idea and the fact that Max just *wouldn’t let it go*. It wasn’t as if she’d agonized over it. For weeks. Because of course she wouldn’t waste time on that.

“God, Max, if he likes me so much then why hasn’t *he* asked *me* out?” She crossed her arms, almost hitting herself in the face with the duster, scowling. “Why am I supposed to assume he wants me to do it if he won’t do it?”

Max grinned salaciously. “I didn’t say anything about *doing it*. Where has your mind been?”

“That’s not—!” Jane felt herself blush. “That’s not what I meant and you know it! Stop trying to used my words against me!”

She turned back to the shelf, dusting so angrily she knocked a book right onto the ground. Squaring her shoulders again, she reached down and picked it up. It was no business of Max’s what she’d thought of. Even if occasionally it had been how his hands would feel on her waist, how his lips would taste, how he would look at her through hazy eyes as he pulled her close.

It was so *stupid*.

And it didn’t help that they got along so well, chatting and teasing each other over the desk or register. Yeah, okay, so he was perfect in pretty much every way. That still didn’t mean he *liked* her. It didn’t mean he wanted to go out with her. It didn’t mean anything other than that... they liked to chat.

Max seemed to realize she was arguing in vain, shrugging her shoulders.

“Okay, well, don’t I say I didn’t try and help you...” she glanced at

the calendar that hung on the wall behind her. “And it’s Thursday. So if you do decide to stop being afraid of the cutest guy you’ve ever met trying to flirt with you, ask him to see a movie or something. I mean, to be fair, he’s being a dumbass too by not asking you out first, but you could flex that feminist muscle and do the thing.”

“Not happening.”

They both went back to their tasks, but Jane couldn’t help but glance across the street towards the Quarry, spotting the tall frame of the aforementioned dumbass through the windows. On Thursdays he had always had a shift and then he would come straight over and cozy up in a chair, working on his thesis or sorting through the box of old X-Men comics and sometimes even just coming up to the desk to chat a bit as Pippin and Merry assaulted him with purrs and love.

All of the halflings loved him, actually. Sam had always been friendly and now was no exception, but one time she’d peeked around a corner to see Frodo’s tiny brown fuzzy body curled up in Mike’s lap as he read.

He was so perfect it almost hurt.

Max left, her shift over, and Jane settled in behind the counter, her own homework spread before, stacks of Shakespeare and some E. E. Cummings for her creative essay. Finals were approaching, the last stretch before Christmas break, and she was feeling the stress of trying to make study guides and note cards and finish her final projects and get everything settled before she headed home for break.

She was so busy she didn’t notice him come in until he thunked a to-go cup on the desk in front of her.

“Oh!” She startled, looking up from her copy of *The Merchant of Venice*. “Jesus.”

He grinned, clearly teasing her. “Oops, sorry, Eleven, didn’t mean to scare you. I wanted you to try my newest creation.”

“What is it?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Am I going to regret trying it?”

“Nah, come on, trust me. It’s good.” He pushed the cup towards her, making his face as serious as possible, which wasn’t very serious when he was trying not to laugh. “I *promise*, okay? You’ll like it.”

He was heartachingly handsome and in front of her, asking her to trust him. She couldn’t help but waver, sighing and reaching for the cup, eyes locked with his as she took a careful sip. Chai hit her tongue, but in an icy form, sweet and cold and delicious, different from her usual iced order. She swallowed, savoring it, then took another sip before setting the cup down, heart racing at his triumphant grin.

“It was my idea, actually, you know how a granita is kind of like a coffee slushie?” She nodded as he explained. “Well, this is the same thing but with chai. I knew you had to try it once we got the batch right but isn’t it good?”

“It’s amazing,” she admitted.

“My boss said I could name it since it was my idea.”

She was too busy downing half the cup to pay too close attention to what he was saying, lost in the liquid bliss. “Mhm.”

“I was thinking, since we’re across the street from Mirkwood, might as well call it Elevensies.” His grin was adorably crooked, dark eyes dancing. “What do you think?”

I think I’m in love with you, she thought dreamily.

“That’s... really perfect,” she said instead, a genuine expression of gratitude lighting up her face. Had he really named a drink after her?

Maybe Max was onto something. It was too good to be true and she tried not to let it turn her mind to fuzz.

“I was hoping you would say that.”

He leaned forward, arms resting on the counter, watching her. There was another one of those quiet pauses, the ones that weren’t awkward but just *comfortable*, easy and calm and perfect. Where she didn’t have to worry about looking at him, where he looked at her

too and she could just drink in who he was and how he was... no pressure to be *more*.

Those were the moments she let fill up her wanting, the thing she settled for since she knew she couldn't have *him*.

"Hey, so, um, I was thinking..." he said slowly. Jane felt her heart start racing. "What if, um, maybe like, if you wanted—"

There was a sudden crash from the back room and the screech of a cat and Jane nearly jumped out of her skin, whipping around toward the noise. *Pippin*, she thought, suddenly terrified at what sort of squashed furry pancake she would find beneath a pile of boxes. She had no time to consider Mike and what he had been saying, rushing away from the counter and pushing into the large room full of boxes of books to be inspected and priced and broken furniture and of course cardboard Legolas.

"Pip? Oh fuck," she worried, flicking on the light and staring at the pile of boxes and books that were strewn across the floor. "Pippin? Please, god, don't be dead. What will I tell Benny?"

She heard a *mrow* come from behind her and turned just in time to see the naughty cat make his way out from behind a busted armchair, fur a little kerfuffled, but in one fuzzy piece. Jane sagged in relief, reaching down and picking up to give him a tight squeeze. He yowled in protest and she put him back down before turning back to the mess she knew she would have to clean up.

"Ugh, fuck!" It was groan. "I needed to study, not do this. Damn it, Pippin!"

But the lithe grey and white form was gone, off to some corner to lick his fur back down and ignore her annoyance at the trouble he caused. She went over to the boxes, sighing as she crouched down and started collecting books, hoping none of them had snapped their binding or ripped their covers.

"Did you need some help?" Mike appeared in the doorway. "You're right, he really does have it out for you."

Jane looked up at him and then quickly back down. He was being so nice again, so sweet and perfect. Like some knight in shining armor, trying to help her. It just made it harder, and she quickly shook her head, trying to resist the temptation. It would be too easy to let him help her, to close the door and let him in. She was cracking.

“No, no it’s fine,” she snapped. It came out more harshly than she intended but she was too upset with herself to care in the moment. “I mean... I got it. *Customers* aren’t supposed to be back here anyways.”

Focused on grabbing another book, she missed the way his face fell, the light leaving his eyes.

“Oh, um... okay. Sorry.”

Jane instantly felt bad for snapping, looking up from the mess to apologize. But the doorway was empty.

As empty as the place in her chest where her heart usually fluttered for him.

&&&

It took almost the entirety of her four hour shift to clean up the mess, only coming out of the storeroom to ring up a few customers and keep an eye on things.

Inside, her gut was twisted with guilt. It had been churning and building with each book she stacked and box she filled. She watched the dust bunnies dance across the floor as she swept up the place for good measure, feeling the same turmoil race around her mind, remorse and misery dancing in similar circles.

She’d been *rude*. Right after he’d brought her a new drink. That he’d named after her. And he was always so friendly and nice. When she’d ended up in the corner of the Quarry almost in tears after failing a project, he’d appeared with a hot cup of herbal tea and a peach scone, saying nothing, but scooting them her way and offering one of those heart-melting smiles.

It wasn’t the first time he’d done something nice for no reason, actually. Occasionally, when she’d missed lunch running from one

class to another, a muffin would end up on the counter next to her cup of chai. It was hard to return the favor, but she found herself settling a few books he might like and draping a jacket across his favorite armchair down in the Mine, keeping it free until he arrived after his shift.

And she'd called him a *customer* and told him to go away.

With a tired sigh she set the broom in the corner and headed back to the counter. It was past nine-thirty, she realized as she glanced at the clock. He always left around eight-thirty.

He probably slipped out. Didn't want to deal with me after I was such a bitch .

It made sense, really, it was what she deserved. But it didn't make it hurt any less.

Tears welled up and she quickly wiped them away, feeling stupid for... feeling. There was no reason. They weren't even friends, not really. He didn't even know her real name, he always called her Eleven and she'd liked it too much to ever contradict him. Why get so worked up over someone she didn't really know?

Whatever. It was time to start closing anyways.

Jane couldn't keep the melancholy out of her steps as she moped around, checking the chairs and letting the one exhausted looking girl know they were closing soon. Then she cashed out the register, tucking the deposit into the safe. It was almost ten by then and she took a deep breath before heading down the stairs, hating how the building creaked and groaned at night. It was cold too, there'd been a chance for snow all week, and the pipes banged and squawked as they tried to keep warm.

She headed to the wall with the light switches but froze as she heard a soft sound, coming from around one of the corners. A soft... wheezing, like heavy breathing.

Her heart froze in her chest and she looked around for the nearest weapon, spotting a decorative sword hanging on the wall and

snatching it, hoping to look at least a little intimidating to whoever was waiting around the bookshelf. Taking a deep breath she stepped closer, steeling her nerves before springing around the corner, sword held threateningly as she yelled.

“Whazz—Ah!”

The person sat bolt upright in the chair they’d been sitting—no, *sleeping* in, and it took three seconds for the fear to melt and for Jane to realize it was none other than Mike, staring up at her intimidating form with sleep-filled eyes of terror. She immediately lowered the sword, her heart now racing for other reasons, frowning at him.

“What are you still doing here?” She was breathless, panting a bit. “I thought you left.”

He was still dazed but then looked around, confused, before holding up his wrist to check the time on his watch. His whole body jolted and he jumped out of the chair, looking around wildly, muttering, “Shit shit shit shit shit!”

“Um—”

“Shit, is it really almost ten? Shit *fuck*, goddamnit...” He was gathering his books and pencils, shoving them into his bag before suddenly deflating and flopping back into the chair, holding his head in his hands. “Fuck, I’m so screwed.”

“Um...” she tried again, blinking in confusion. “Can I ask why?”

“I missed the last bus... I live on the other side of the city, I bike when it’s warm but it’s fucking freezing now so I take the bus and—” He groaned again. “Lucas already left town, he’s the only one with a car. Fuck.” A resigned sigh.

“How far?”

“About eight miles so... about a three hour walk.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “But it’s freezing out.”

“I know.”

It was quiet and then he finally stood, looking miserable but trying to strengthen his resolve as he faced the inevitable. "Guess there's no point in waiting around."

"Well—" She started but then stopped the idea from leaving her mouth, shaking her head at her stupidity. No, that was bad. Not good. She should definitely not do that.

Instead she followed him back up the stairs, worrying at her lip as he dragged his feet towards the door, fighting with herself with each step. When they reached the glass of the front door, Jane couldn't hold in a gasp.

It was snowing, huge, soft, white flakes that piled along the sidewalk and street, a solid inch already covering everything in a crisp blanket.

"Wow," she breathed, forgetting her internal strife for a moment as she took in the sparkling scene before them.

"Wow," he agreed from beside her.

Her eyes glanced down at his shoes, noting the worn pair of sneakers, and the stupid idea suddenly became less stupid as she realized his feet would be soaked and freezing if he walked for three hours across town. There was no way she could let that happen. His hand touched the door handle, as if to push it open and head out, but her own hand landed on his forearm, stopping him, and she shook her head.

"No no, you can't. You'll freeze or... get pneumonia. It's too far," she spouted as she shook her head, unable to meet his eyes.

Mike blinked down at her hand on his arm and then at her face, clearly confused. "Well, yeah, but... I don't really have any other options."

"Stay with me," she blurted.

The second the words left her mouth she felt her face flush bright pink, but she mustered the courage to look up, her light hazel-browns meeting his ebony gaze. She set her jaw, wanting him to know she was serious despite the sudden nervousness that swallowed her whole. It was a stupid idea, but the only one she had. There was no

way she would send him out into the cold.

“Um,” he was still processing what she had said and she realized she needed to clarify her bold statement.

“I live like, a block from here. I have a pull out couch you can crash on for the night and in the morning you can catch your bus,” she said quickly, the words tumbling out messily. “It’s small but it’s better than walking nine miles and freezing to death.”

“You want me to come sleep at your place?” He was still in a daze.

“Well, I mean, where else will you sleep? On the street?” She crossed her arms a bit, trying to be assertive even though she felt like shaking with nerves.

“I could... stay here?” He patted the bookshelf next to them. “That chair was comfortable enough.”

Jane couldn’t hold in a snort. “Trust me, you don’t want Max finding a strange man sleeping here when she opens tomorrow. She’ll actually tear you apart.”

He grimaced, realizing he’d run out of options. “I wouldn’t want to make you feel uncomfortable... I mean, I’m just a random *customer*.”

The last word left his mouth bitterly and she felt shame prick the back of her neck. So her words had hurt. She tried to shake it off, looking around the empty shop.

“Look, if you were going to be a creep or something, you probably would have been by now,” she replied seriously. “Considering we’re alone in the back of a bookstore at night. But I’m not worried about that because I know you’re not so... you can sleep on my couch tonight and catch your bus in the morning.” He still looked hesitant and she tried to break the tension with a joke. “You can let me have my chai for free for the next month and we’ll consider it even. I’d feel bad leaving you out on the streets, so if anything you’re doing me a favor and letting me have peace of mind.” She sighed as he still stared at her, clearly thinking, and added a pitiful, “Please?”

His shoulders dropped and he gave her lopsided grin, finally nodding.

“Okay, sure, it’s a deal. I can’t pretend like a couch sounds *way* better than walking in the snow or sleeping behind the Quarry.” His grin broadened. “But you’re getting free chai for *life*. On me. For saving me from getting murdered in an alley.”

She snorted a laugh, unable to help it, feeling her face heat up. She quickly stuck out her hand. “Alright, it’s a deal.”

He reached out and shook her small hand with his own, the warmth shooting right up her arm to her face and she prayed he couldn’t tell she was blushing.

“I’m Mike, by the way,” he told her as they shook. “Mike Wheeler.”

“I know,” she blurted and then immediately panicked, realizing how creepy that sounded. “I-I mean, you have a nametag. I didn’t know your last name. It’s nice.” *Shut up shut up shut up!* “I’m Jane Hopper.”

“Nah, you’re Eleven.” He was grinning again. “I won’t even apologize. It’s just what I think when I see you. Maybe I’ll call you El for short.”

They had stopped shaking hands but neither had let go. Jane didn’t notice, feeling too much like she was floating. He had called her that almost every time she went across the street, but somehow making a nickname for it—and a cute one at that—made her whole body buzz. He knew who she was. He thought about her enough to give her nickname a nickname. Her heart swooned.

“Y-Yeah,” she breathed, then quickly swallowed, realizing she needed to apologize for her earlier behavior. “And, um, sorry about snapping at you earlier. I’ve been kind of stressed, but it wasn’t cool for me to take it out on you. So... I’m sorry.”

“Forget it, El.” He hadn’t let go of her hand but his eyes were softer. “No worries. I’m over it.”

“Cool,” she exhaled, shoulders relaxing.

“Cool.”

There was a moment where they just stood, her hand wrapped in his,

each heartbeat an eternity as she stared into the ebony depths of his midnight eyes, the freckles that softly spattered his nose prettier than any night sky.

“So...” he broke the silence first, eyes still glued to her. “Did you need any help finishing up closing?”

His eyes dropped to their hands and he gently let go, slowly, almost hesitantly. Her heart skipped another beat but she tried to breath, shrugging.

“Well there’s four litter boxes to clean, how good are you with a pooper scooper?” She deadpanned.

“What?”

His eyes bugged out and she couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m kidding, I’ll scoop if you go turn off the lights in the Mine. The Balrog always gives me the creeps.”

“Is that what you thought I was?” He snorted good-naturedly.

“Maybe. Your snoring is pretty scary.”

He full on laughed at that and then turned, setting his bag and jacket down. “Okay, I’ll get the lights, you get the... poop.”

A giggle escaped her lips and he threw a grin over his shoulder as he made his way back to the stairs. Jane felt her shoulders relax as she went to the back to grab a bag and the pooper scooper. The litter boxes were hidden throughout the store and it didn’t take long for her clean all four, inquisitive kitty faces following her around, knowing that after she cleaned their boxes, it was food time.

Mike’s footsteps came up the creaky stairs and she beckoned him into the back room again, to the far corner where a bag of cat food sat and four little bowls.

“This is how I win their love,” she explained as she scooped up some food, stepping around the crowd of cats that were purring and crying at her feet.

The food landed in the bowls, pebbling metallicly, and the furballs all lunged, pushing each other until each had a place. Contented crunching filled the air and Jane looked up to see Mike leaning in the doorway with a grin.

“Okay, that’s pretty cute,” he admitted. His eyes moved up from the cats to her. “*Ridiculously* cute.”

She couldn’t help but blush, even if the compliment wasn’t for her. Or was it.

He cleared his throat, looking away quickly. “Um, lights are off...” His jacket was on and his bookbag back on his shoulder. “Ready when you are.”

“All that’s left is to lock the door,” she replied as she gave Sam a final pat. “And then we can head on our way.”

“Are you sure, Eleven?” he blurted, then flushed. “I just mean... are you sure you’re okay with it? I don’t want to make you uncomfortable in your own home.”

Jane considered that. Would she feel uncomfortable? Probably a bit. But it didn’t matter because it meant he would be safe and warm. And that was more important to her than the thought of being slightly weirded out by a man she only sort of knew sleeping on her couch for one night.

“I wouldn’t have offered if I hadn’t meant it,” she said firmly, meeting his eyes. “And it’s not like I’ve never had anyone stay over before...” His brow furrowed and he bit his lip. “My dad comes and visits and sometimes he stays the night. It’s why I have a pull out couch, actually, he said he was too old and creaky to sleep on a lumpy couch, that he ‘needed an actual mattress’.” Mike’s face cleared as she tried to imitate her dad’s gruff voice. “He even has some clothes, so if you’re lucky you can borrow some pajamas or something.”

Mike nodded, taking it in, and smiled. “Alright. I won’t argue with that.”

Jane smiled back sincerely and then went to gather her own things, leaving the clutter of kitties to their dinner. The pair made their way to the front and she turned off the lights, leaving them in darkness, before pushing outside. She'd wisely worn a pair of scuffed Doc Martens that kept her socked feet toasty despite the inch and a half of snow. It was still coming down and they walked in the muffled silence, the only sound the soft hushed sizzle of settling snow and their footsteps crunching along the sidewalk.

There was a glow around the streetlights, warm and orange, that lit up the windows of the apartments that lined the street, up to the tops of the buildings. Jane's apartment was one of them and as they reached the end of the block she turned and pointed to the door that led to where she lived.

"Wow, it is close. And not too far from campus too," he marveled.

"You said you lived across town?"

"Yeah, my friend Dustin, his dad left him a house and we all share it." He looked down at his feet, pushing through the thick white blanket of snow. "Me and him and our friends Will and Lucas. We all grew up together and decided to come to the same university. It's kind of far from campus but it's super cheap rent split between the four of us and I can't imagine being somewhere they're not so it's a pretty sweet deal."

They reached the door and Jane went first, leading him into the small front area and stomping the snow from her shoes. He did the same and they both headed for the staircase.

"Sounds pretty great. My boss is actually my landlord, Benny Hammond. He's friends with my dad, they grew up together and he kind of looks after me," she explained warmly as they started up the stairs. "He owns a bunch of property out here. Like this place and some other apartments and the bookstore. But he spends most of his time cooking over at Benny's Burgers."

"Oh! I love that place, they have the best breakfast food."

"His waffles are to die for," she agreed.

They'd made it to the third floor and she made her way out of the staircase and down the hall as they talked, heading for her apartment. It took her a minute to find her keys and Mike fell silent as she searched, pulling them from the depths of her bag and then unlocking door, trying to remember if she'd left anything embarrassing lying around.

The door swung open and with a final breath, and a thought of, *Too late to go back now*, she shuffled into her humble abode, feeling him follow.

It was small, but not too small, and after taking off her shoes and jacket and setting her bag on the two-person table in the kitchen, she showed him the living room where the couch was. Grey and battered but clean. She started to take the cushions off but Mike stopped her.

"Here, I'll get the couch pulled out if you want to grab those pajamas you mentioned?" He was friendly enough but kept his distance. "And maybe a blanket if I'm lucky?"

"It is kind of cold in here..." she frowned, walking over to the thermostat and turning it up. There was no sudden hum as the heat turned on and she frowned harder, walking over to vent and putting her hand over it. Only cold air blew out. "Oh shit. Not *again*."

She knew it was too late to call Benny about it but she also knew she didn't have enough blankets for both of them.

"Is the heat not working?" Mike asked. It was such a small space he didn't really have to yell even though they were in separate rooms.

"No... it does this like once every winter but of course it happens the one night I promise someone else a warm place to sleep." It came out as a whine as she stared down at the carpet, feeling ashamed.

Mike's socked feet moved a little closer and she looked up, suddenly breathless as he looked down at her, dark eyes full of stars. Her own feet moved closer.

"Hey, it's okay. You still have hot water, right? I could make us some tea or something. That's warm."

“Yeah,” she breathed.

“And I’ll be fine. It’s still better than being outside so... thanks, El,” his feet shuffled closer, just barely, as he looked down at her. “I really appreciate you taking me in.”

There was a chill in the apartment but suddenly she couldn’t feel it. Instead there was a lovely warmth, coming off both of them, and she found herself drawn closer to him, so close that the smell of coffee and bit of aftershave and fresh laundry filled her nose. He was tall, much taller than her and the front of his green coat filled her vision, unzipped enough she could spot his usual navy hoodie.

All of her senses were filled with him, except one, and she felt the sudden urge to reach out and touch him, to pull him closer and closer until...

She gasped, stepping back, feeling her face flush with the heat her apartment lacked.

How could you think about kissing him? He’s going to think you’re some weird creep, inviting him to your place and then pouncing on him!

With speed that surprised herself, she sprang backward and spun around, racing towards her kettle and quickly filling it with water. Her heart was pounding so loudly she was sure he would hear it.

“Tea! I’ll make the tea. Wait, let me get you the pajamas, um, and I’ll see if I have more blankets somewhere...”

She was rushing around, avoiding his gaze, putting the kettle on and then darting towards her room where her dad’s small collection of clothes lived. They were hers more than his since she wore them even when he wasn’t around, but luckily the plaid pajama pants were clean and tucked into her drawer. There was an oversized police academy sweater and she grabbed it too, running out into the living room and setting them on the pulled out couch bed before making a beeline for the storage closet, pulling out the two miserable extra blankets and sighing, deciding he would need them more than she would.

By the time she was done buzzing around she felt kind of hot, the chilly apartment seeming more like a blessing. The kettle whistled and she quickly bustled to the kitchen but found Mike there, taking it off the stove and filling mugs that had been set on the counter. He looked over his shoulder as she came in.

"I found the mugs and tea bags, I hope you don't mind that I kind of snooped through your cabinets."

She gestured noncommittally, a bit out of breath. "That's fine. Um, I'm going to get ready for bed but the pajamas and blankets are on the couch so when I'm done in the bathroom it's all yours."

"Thanks, El."

Her heart twisted at that *name*. It felt so right but she didn't want to dwell on how it or how *he* made her feel and she quickly turned around and rushed towards her room to grab her fuzzy robe and pajamas.

It wasn't until the bathroom door was firmly shut behind her that she let herself slump against the sink, head in her hands, barely stifling a groan. Everything was tangled up inside of her, longing and wanting and apprehension and guilt. She didn't know what was *right*, what she was *allowed* to feel, but she was pretty sure the words and thoughts bouncing around her mind weren't okay.

Her hands reached for her toothbrush as she tried complete her nightly routine, pausing to stare at herself in the mirror. There was no masking the desperate longing that filled her eyes. She huffed and shoved her toothbrush under the stream of water, glaring at herself as she brushed her teeth and then spat, trying to get that *look* off of her face, the one that threatened to show him everything.

Putting her honey-brown curls up into a messy bun, she snatched up her facewash and lathered up, scrubbing harder than normal, irritated and annoyed and honestly pissed off. When she came up for air, she gasped, grabbing the towel to dry her face.

Her eyes found herself in the mirror there, again, and she scowled.

"You're being stupid," she told her reflection. "It's not okay to even think you love him. Because you don't. You don't even know him." Saying it loud put a quiver in her hands but she pushed on. "You don't invite strange guys to sleep on your couch and then attack them with feelings, okay? Especially not bullshit fantasy ones. That's not okay, Jane."

She blinked at herself, a sudden thought presenting itself, and she tried again.

"It's not okay, Eleven." The name felt right on her tongue. "Stop being weird."

Her chest filled with warmth despite the contradiction of emotions that were being held in there. *Eleven*. It felt more like who she was now than Jane ever had.

How had he come out of nowhere and made her feel so right and good? More than even her dad had. More than Max did. It wasn't logical, just how much he seemed to know her even though he didn't know where she came from and what she'd been through.

He was just right. He always understood, sometimes even when she didn't. It was like somehow, now that she had met him, she realized some part of her had been missing. And she wanted him to be the one to fill it.

Was that even possible?

Wondering was giving her a headache and she finished her business in the bathroom. It took her a few seconds to work up the courage to open the door and face him again, especially since her pep talk had been an utter failure.

He wasn't in the living room, but the two cups of tea had been set on the end table by the couch and she went over to them, looking around in confusion. Just then the door to her room creaked open, it hadn't been shut all the way, and Mike appeared wearing the pajama pants and sweatshirt, the latter a little loose around his arms but fit snugly across his broad chest. He was frowning.

“Don’t you have more blankets? You’re going to freeze.”

“Um, no, but I figured I’d just layer up. I have socks and my robe,” she shrugged.

“You should have these,” he asserted, moving to the couch-bed and trying to gather up the blankets, “I don’t need them.”

“You literally wouldn’t have anything to sleep under if I did.” It was a snort. “You’re keeping the blankets. Why were you in my room anyways?”

He stopped trying to rip the blankets from his bed and looked over his shoulder at her, having the decency to seem embarrassed.

“I figured I’d change, sorry, I swear I wasn’t snooping, I just didn’t think it would be polite if you came out of the bathroom and I was like... half naked in your living room.”

Would I have minded? Jane shook her head. *Quit that you’re being weird.*

“Y-Yeah...” Her cheeks flushed. “Totally not polite, um, no worries. I weirdly trust you so...” She flushed harder, realizing just how stupid that sounded.

“I mean, I haven’t poisoned you so far.”

“So far?” She cocked an eyebrow and he grinned, that teasing glimmer filling his eyes again. “Do I need to worry?”

“Nah. If you stopped coming in I would probably lose the will to ever make a chai again and then I’d get fired and then I’d quit college and move home and live in my parents’ basement playing video games until I’m thirty-five and they kick me out,” he deadpanned.

“O-oh,” she stammered, eyes widening.

His grin had her melting and his words had her spinning. Could she really mean that much? Or just a favorite customer... more likely. Her heart hammered in her chest and the urge to say something stupid doubled. God, this had been a bad idea. It was time to run

away.

Her eyes landed on her cup of tea, still slightly steaming, and she snatched it up, taking a sip and nearly burning her tongue. She winced but tried to play it off, needing to just get away before she did something stupid like tried to kiss him again.

“Yum!” Yeah, her tongue was definitely burned. She retreated to the door of her room, which wasn’t more than a few feet away from the back of the couch. “Thanks for the tea. Bathroom is open if you need it.”

“Oh, you’re going to sleep?” His eyes slanted with disappointment.

“Yeah, I think so,” she nodded, retreating another step.

“Okay... well thanks again.”

“Don’t mention it.” *Seriously.*

“Um... goodnight, El.”

El paused, her hand on the door, ready to close it and separate herself from him. She bit her lip, nodding, feeling like she was making some sort of mistake. It was for the best. It was the right thing to do.

Right?

“Goodnight, Mike.”

With final nod and an awkward smile—nothing like his smile which was so genuine and perfect and pretty as he watched her push him away—she shut the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

i don't love the end of this but i couldn't figure out why so i just left it.

dun dun dunnnnnn.

yeah one more chapter to go. my loose deadline is by

next wednesday but i'm going to be pretty busy
thursday and friday and sunday so i guess we'll just
have to wait and see. sorry. but i'm still feeling the
vibe so that's good.

thanks for all the sweet comments. they literally
make my week. i simultaneously crave validation
and refuse to think i need it so that's a wild way to
live, contribute how you'd like.

see you wHeNeVeR

-g

3. Chorus

Notes for the Chapter:

i almost made my deadline so that's pretty awesome. i stayed home so sick from work today (i'm fine no worries) but that helped with me actually having time to finish this, which was no small task lmao.

originally the ending i had planned fit more with the vibe of the song, but when i looked at the story and how i had written it, it just didn't the vibe of what i had so far so i had to delete a large chunk and start over which always sucks but i feel much better about what i have.

kayla: i'm sorry but i changed that thing i told i was going to do. another time!

also big thanks to rhi for calming the me fuck down when i was realizing i didn't like what i had for always listening when i lose my shit. you're an angel.

i think that's all i have to say. i hope you like it.

El stared at back of her bedroom door for an entire minute. The hot mug was burning her hand but the twisted tangles of emotions thicketing her chest kept her from noticing her reddening skin. Her mind was too preoccupied with what was currently out on her pull-out couch.

Or rather, *who*.

Shutting him out was the smart thing. He would sleep out *there* and she would sleep in *here* and then tomorrow he would hop on his bus and they would go back to being each other's favorite customers. Acquaintances, maybe. Casual friends at most.

But *fuck* she wanted more than that.

Her mind clashed with her heart, hand hovering over the doorknob.

The logic that lived in her brain was telling her to crawl into bed and forget him, but it was fighting with her emotions that were telling her to open the door and go out there and—

And *what*? Kiss him? Blurt out that she thought she loved him? Freak him out and send him running out into the snow filled street?

No, if she was opening this door... all that could happen was talking. That made sense, talking. They could totally talk. Just until she finished her tea.

Her brain and heart shook hands agreeably and then she was throwing the door open, stepping out out of her room, to where her heart was leading. He was already under the blankets, sitting up against the back of the couch, but at the sound of the door opening he scrabbled to turn around, eyes wide and warm.

“El?” His brow furrowed into the pretty question mark she had decided she loved. “You okay?”

“I... I’m not tired actually,” she blurted. “I was thinking of maybe watching a movie or...”

She definitely had not been thinking of watching a movie, but she didn’t want to weird him out and tell him she wanted to just... talk. Instead of being weirded out he just seemed more confused, glancing at the clock on the wall. It was well past ten-thirty. Late.

“Don’t you have classes tomorrow?” His voice was full of concern for her, which was touching but not really the emotion she was searching for.

“No...” Now she was confused. Didn’t he know it almost finals? “It’s dead days until next Wednesday. No new stuff, just reviewing. And I mostly have literature classes this semester so it’s just a lot of reading and comprehension and making sure I have enough evidence to defend the canonicity of Shakespeare.” An exhale. *Quit babbling.* “So, um, no, but I close again tomorrow night. What about you?”

His neck was craned painfully around to look at her but he smirked. “Y’know, I sort of forgot it was dead days. I’m so used to always

having to be *doing* something.”

El let a soft smile grace her lips to fight off the urge to giggle, the heavy brick wall sitting between him and her heart slowly cracking. Why did he have to make her laugh so much? And so *easily*?

“Yeah,” she agreed, looking away quickly. “I’m surprised I’ve made it this far. College and being alone and stuff...”

She took a few steps closer, walking around the edge of the couch and sitting on the arm, so he didn’t have to break his neck trying to keep up the conversation. Her feet were cold and she tried to tuck them under her, brushing at her hair self-consciously.

“Oh, here, are you cold?” He scooted to the far side of the mattress, pushing the blankets toward her. “I can share. If you don’t mind.”

“Um...” *No, El, don’t do that.* “Sure, thanks.”

When she lifted the blanket it was deliciously warm underneath and she used it to cover her knees, pulling them to her chest and then wrapping her arms around them, hand clutching her mug of tea. She sipped it, staring at him, feeling toasty and warm and snuggly-safe.

“So... you don’t like being alone?” His expression was inquisitive, but there was something in his eyes she couldn’t quite read, something searching.

She couldn’t meet his espresso stare, tucking another stray curl behind her ear. “I miss my dad a lot. I, um, was homeschooled so leaving home for the first time and doing all of this alone... if I hadn’t met Max I don’t think I would still be here. It’s been a lot all at once. All the *people*.”

“You were homeschooled?”

“I... it was more to catch me up. I didn’t really have a normal education until I was like fifteen, and ‘normal’ is a stretch because I took an English class a local high school but I didn’t actually go there so I was kind of weird. It took years for me to go from a third grade level to where I was supposed to be.”

Her face was guarded and he must have been able to tell because there was a heavy pause as she sipped more of her tea. He quickly did the same, stealing glances at her until she let out a sigh, waiting for her to continue.

The past... it wasn't something she liked to talk about. But it was *her* past and she'd wasted too many years trying to run from it. If the years of therapy had taught her anything, it was that being honest and open worked better than shutting herself away from the world in fear. And that odd trust that had filled her since the very first time he'd smiled and handed her a cold drink hadn't faded away... if anything it had only grown stronger.

It was time to bare her soul.

"My mom died when I was two. I... don't really remember her. But she was married to this guy and when she died, I was left with him. And he didn't really want me."

Her fingers danced around the edge of her mug, not so much nerves as uncertainty. It wasn't a happy story, at least not the beginning.

"So he never let me leave the house. If I cried or was too noisy, he'd lock me in the closet. Like, he gave me food and I could watch TV but he told me that outside was terrible and scary and I was a little kid so I believed him. I didn't know there was a different way to live. That's where I stayed until I turned eleven. And the police came one night, because Papa—"

The word caught in her throat, her eyes closing, the flash of a tall figure with white hair and a disappointed stare. She could feel it, his hand in her hair as he dragged her towards the pitch black closet, his voice telling her she was stupid and worthless, that she should have died with her mother. Her hands trembled, tears squeezing out under her eyelids, the panic winning, drowning and suffocating her.

"You are nothing, Jane. Nothing."

A soothing hand steadied hers, keeping the tea from sloshing over the side of the mug.

“El, hey, it’s okay. You don’t have to talk about it.”

Breath on her forehead, and the smell of coffee and serene memories. That was real. The cold fingers digging into her scalp and the angry voice were not.

Her eyes cracked open and Mike was there, in front of her, gazing at her with a worried expression as his hands covered hers. El sniffled, sucking the emotion back in, the sight of his concern-filled eyes a breath of fresh air. The world came back, the real world, and she nodded at him, sniffling again.

“Thank you. I’m okay, sorry... it’s just...” She inhaled sharply, aching lungs filling with sweet oxygen, the face behind her eyelids cruel and disappointed. “Hard to make it real again.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if it’s too much. It’s okay,” he reassured her, his thumb gently rubbing a circle on the back of her hand. “I won’t make you.”

“I-I want to finish... if you don’t mind.”

She stared down at their hands, both wrapped around her mug, his so much bigger than hers but so gentle. He was only a few inches away and she fought the urge to bury her face in his neck and hide from the memories. When she looked up he was staring at her like she was made of frost, one shiver away from falling apart. It stole the air from her lungs and she sucked in another breath.

“I’ll listen to anything you want to say,” he said quietly, eyebrows raised in a serious line, mouth solemn. “Anytime.”

Their breath mingled and El felt her heart racing, felt something there, between them.

She pulled back, needing to collect herself, and he let her go, not scooting too far away, but letting her have her space again. It took another deep breath before the rest came out.

“He—Papa—he hadn’t paid some taxes or something, I don’t remember, but they arrested him and took him away and then they found me in the house. My dad did, actually, he’s a cop. He’s not

biological, um, but yeah, he found me and I was too scared to leave the house and he sat with me under a table for like three hours until I decided to go with him. I had to go to social services since it was an abuse case. But he would come and visit. Bring me waffles and clothes and stuff that used to be his daughter's. He called me... his second chance. I trusted him because he was *good* and when he asked if me he could adopt me... I wouldn't have wanted anyone else."

"I'm glad he found you," Mike murmured. "That you weren't alone."

She was still in the thick of her memories, but she felt the warmth of his words as she continued the story. "It took a long time to catch up. He got me tutors and teachers and we moved to Chicago and I had therapy and all of that... and I'm okay now, usually. But sometimes it's still really hard and I miss him... it's why he comes and visits all the time," she rambled a bit, unsure of how to end the story. It had kind of been a dump but she felt a lighter and more open. He deserved to know. But it was still awfully sad. "Sorry, I know that's a lot—I mean, I know I'm just a random girl and here I am dumping on you—"

"No." Now he couldn't meet her eyes. "Trust me, you are *not* just some random girl."

El's throat went dry and her eyes went wide. She wanted to ask—so *badly*. But the fear of pushing too far too fast held her back and she cleared her throat instead, grasping a random question, to change the topic rather clumsily, her words clunky.

"Um... so, um where are you... from?"

His ebony gaze looked up, a crooked grin pulling at his mouth. "Indiana. Totally exciting, I know, try and hold in your enthusiasm." She giggled despite herself. "Small town, like... fifty thousand? Pretty standard suburban upbringing. Parents divorced when I was seventeen and I couldn't wait to finish high school and get away. See, I was kind of a huge nerd, and I had nerd friends and there were always assholes who liked to pick on us. Leaving Hawkins has been like... the best thing that's ever happened to me." A small cough left his throat. "So far anyways."

“Sorry about your parents divorcing.”

“Sorry about your mom dying and your stepdad being an actual piece of shit,” he countered with a shrug.

“Sorry you got bullied,” she felt a smirk tickle her face, wanting to release the tension, wanting to let herself smile again. “And that you were a huge nerd.”

“I’m still a nerd. That will never change,” he grinned, though it faltered. “But, um, I really am sorry about... everything you had to go through. I didn’t know—I mean, I wouldn’t have known, but like... it doesn’t make it suck any less.”

El let out a long breath, the rush of air making his dark, floppy bangs dance around his temples. They were still close and she didn’t mind. His empathy was nice, much better than pity, but it was hard to explain how she felt about all of it.

“It’s okay, really. Sometimes I think I wouldn’t be as happy and as grateful for what I have now if that hadn’t happened. Or... I mean, like, I survived it. And it’s still hard sometimes but now I know what I *can* make it through, so the smaller bad things, they don’t take away as much as they could.” That didn’t really make sense and she frowned, trying again. “Like, all the bad things that happened to me, they didn’t keep the good things from happening. And the good things, they don’t make the bad things go away but they make them easier so... I’m glad I’m where I’m at now, but sometimes it’s still hard. Being around so many people I don’t know. Trying not to fail.”

It was a messy explanation, barely one at all, and she bit her lip. Her tea had gone cold but she didn’t want to finish it anyways, because then she would have to leave this warm space because that had been the deal she’d made with herself. No, she definitely didn’t want to leave him, and the logic that had been keeping him at arm’s length was quiet now, so she set the cold mug on the end table behind her, untucking her legs a bit. He moved to shift away but she shook her head.

Come closer, she whispered to him in her mind.

There was another quiet moment and then Mike spoke, looking at her, admiration glowing out of his eyes. “Wow, El, that’s... kind of beautiful. Like, I mean, not everyone could go through what you did and still think like that. But *you* do. That’s incredible.”

Her cheeks flushed and she ducked her head. “It’s nothing. We all have to live for something. And I almost didn’t get a chance. It’s hard to not be grateful.”

“You’re just like so... wow.”

A burst of heat filled her chest, like the fairy lights that tangled through her headboard in her room, small points of warmth that pricked her ribcage. Despite the lack of depth in their relationship, hearing that he thought she was incredible and amazing, just for pushing through and living and trying... it felt so *nice*. It felt better than when her professors handed her a paper with an A, or when Frodo had snuggled with her for the first time, or even that time when her dad had brought home that pretty pink dress for her right after she’d moved in with him and she hadn’t taken it off for two weeks.

It felt like it was *everything*.

“Thanks, Mike,” she whispered.

His eyes were twin stars of darkness, glimmering in the dim light of the living room, watching her with such softness she was sure she could fall into them and wrap herself up in an ebony feather comforter and never leave.

He cleared his throat, setting his own mug behind him and turned to face her fully, pulling the blanket further up the mattress so it fell over both their legs and covered them longways. He stretched out a bit, and she scooted over so he could tuck his feet into the corner next to her, watching as he sighed in relief at being able to stretch his long limbs.

“Hey, so... I really appreciate you sharing with me,” he said truthfully. “I feel kind of bad I don’t have any... like, anything of that magnitude I could share too. But how about this.” He put his hands

up, gesturing emphatically towards himself. "Since you've been honest, you can ask me anything and I'll answer. Even if it's embarrassing."

"Really?" One of her eyebrows lifted automatically, the curiosity opening her mental folder, hungry to know more. And an open invitation? How could she resist? "Okay, um..." She tried to think of something not totally boring. "What's your middle name?"

"Edward. You?"

He had said she could ask him questions but she didn't mind sharing anyways. It felt good.

"Elizabeth."

"Huh, so you really are an El," he mused.

"I guess so," she agreed.

She'd been thinking of herself as El without even realizing it. But it was true. Jane had always felt wrong, like wearing a dress that was three sizes too small. Maybe she'd been Jane at one point, but she'd grown too much, from the small frightened girl to the young woman she was now. It felt right... just like everything else he'd given and shown her.

She came out of her thoughts, hiding a smile, remembering she needed to ask another question. "Oh, um... when's your birthday? Mine's November sixth, I'm going to be twenty-two."

"Cool, I turned twenty-two on June twenty-first, which is not as much as fun as turning twenty-one," he snorted.

"Favorite color?"

"Blue."

"Favorite food?"

"I'm always a sucker for pizza. Or my mom's meatloaf."

“Favorite book?”

“The Hobbit.”

“Why did your parents get a divorce?” *Wait, that’s too much*, she screamed at herself. *Don’t ask that!* “I mean—”

“It’s okay. That’s a fair question, I don’t mind,” he interrupted to assure her. “It’s not a big deal, don’t worry.” Despite his reassurance, it took a moment for him to speak, as though he was trying to make sure he had the right words. “I don’t think they married because they really loved each other, I think my mom kind of settled. And my dad... he just wasn’t that invested in, like he wanted a family because that’s what you were supposed to have but he didn’t care that much. He brought home the bacon and made sure we had a nice house and clothes and stuff. I think he thought that was enough... but we all kind of needed more. My mom got tired of it and then the fighting started... honestly when they told us they were getting a divorce it was kind of a relief. But I’m glad I got away... I mostly go back to make sure Holly is okay.”

“Holly?”

“My little sister, she’s...” He had to think for a minute. “Wow, she’s almost sixteen. I feel so old all of the sudden.”

His dejected expression of horror made her laugh, breezy and light. “Aw, that’s sweet. Is she your only sibling?”

“Nope, I have an older sister too. Nancy. She ended up going to NYU for journalism, to stay with her boyfriend. Well, husband now. He’s my friend Will’s brother, so they come and visit us a lot. It’s nice, now that we get along.” He grinned. “I used to annoy the shit out of her but she really helped me and Holly since we were stuck at home with the screaming and stuff. I got lucky in the sibling department I guess.”

El nodded agreeably, feeling remarkably pleased at being allowed to know so much. “And you said you have your friends? Will, Dustin...”

“And Lucas, yeah! We grew up together, kind of a bunch of nerds.

You've met Dustin, actually, at the Quarry?" She nodded. "And Will's been to Mirkwood a bunch. He's the one who told me I needed to check it out, actually. He's an art student, kind of quiet. You probably wouldn't remember him," he explained breezily. "And then Lucas was my next door neighbor. He's kind of the one who keeps us on track with school and stuff. They're all really great, I'm lucky I had them growing up or it would have been a lot harder. I can't imagine making it through that being alone."

"Yeah," she agreed quietly. "Being alone is hard."

Mike looked immediately crestfallen as he realized his terrible choice of words. "Oh, shit, sorry, I didn't think—"

"It's okay, I know you didn't mean anything," she shook her head, not wanting him to feel bad.

He let out a puff of self-frustration. "I always say things without thinking, I'm sorry."

"It's fine, Mike. Really."

He didn't seem to believe her, shoulders drooping as he let out another annoyed sigh, resting his cheek on his palm for a moment. It was quiet, the accidental sadness that had filled her feeling like a heavy blanket on her chest. A lot of memories had been awakened and while she knew with all her heart that he hadn't meant to hurt her or make her feel bad, it didn't stop the sorrow as she remembered the loneliness that had made her childhood so bleak and dismal.

A warm hand touched hers, the sudden contact making her shiver and she opened her eyes as he slid a little closer to her.

"Well, um, I mean, you're not alone anymore, right?" He frowned as his hand wrapped around hers, the gesture maybe too familiar for their current sort-of-friendship status but welcome all the same. "Jeez, you're *freezing*, El! Are you okay? I could make more tea—"

His words were cut off by a gasp of surprise as she moved towards him in one swift move, her legs bending and pushing her forward, her heart hammering as she let herself give in just a tiny bit,

encouraged by his own boldness. He'd been inching closer and El was tired of waiting, shifting and reaching, needing to feel him closer, the wanting in her soul calling to him.

Her hands found the broadness of his chest, sliding around the sweatshirt he was wearing until she was wrapped around him, her head pressed firmly to his collarbone. It was a hug, not because he needed it but because *she* needed it. Tears welled up in her eyes, the echoing sadness in her mind quieting as she buried her face in his chest, a sob bubbling out of her.

There was no hesitation as he took her into his arms, pulling her close, their legs tangling. His hand pressed against her upper back, thumb rubbing a soothing circle, cheek pressing to her temple as he accepted it, the sudden, personal contact.

It made her cry even harder.

"Hey, it's okay," he soothed. "You're okay. I'm sorry. You're not alone, okay, I'm right here. It's okay, Jane."

At that she looked up, face wet with tears and snot, eyes searching his. She shook her head vehemently. "No, Mike, please. I'm El."

The worry that covered his face melted a bit, eyes softening.

"Okay. It's okay, El. I'm here."

El felt like her heart was going to burst, the closeness and the look in his eyes and the way he was saying her name, accepting all of it despite how new and sudden it was. Courage, the thing she'd always lacked, filled her up like water in vase, her wanting for him bursting into bloom as she looked up and stared into his midnight eyes.

"Mike?" Her voice quavered despite herself.

"Yeah?" It was a breath.

"Can I ask you another question?"

He didn't blink. "Yeah."

“Do you want to kiss me?” She met his intense gaze.

He didn’t answer with words.

She barely had a chance to breathe before his hands were cupping her face, pulling her towards him. Their lips brushed, breath mingling, and she realized he was waiting for her, for permission, maybe, or just teasing. She didn’t give shit what the reason was, sitting up on her knees just enough to bring their waiting lips together, eyes closing.

They finally met, a gentle caress, and El saw fireworks explode behind her eyelids, the entire world slowing as the softness of his lips found hers, noses brushing, his hand on her shoulder blades pushing her firmly to him. She sighed, melting against him, feeling the warmth he had so generously offered flow into her, the comforting smell of coffee in her nose, the taste of herbal tea on her lips.

It was a moment she wanted to live in forever, a single perfect second where everything that hadn’t felt right suddenly did, where she was El and he was Mike and despite how little they knew about each other, they belonged together.

It could have been hours, that perfect moment, thought it was only seconds, and he gently loosened his grip on her, fingers rubbing over the fuzzy material of her robe as he pulled back. His dark eyes were even darker, pupils blown as he stared down at her, full of a hunger that made her blush, quickly swallowed by a delicate tenderness that made her knees wobble beneath her.

“That was my first kiss,” she whispered, hands resting on his chest, feeling dazed enough to admit the embarrassing truth.

He blinked and then amazement swept across his face. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She swallowed thickly, sitting back down a bit. “It was really good.”

“Shit, I didn’t know... I’m sorry—”

“No, no, don’t apologize. I-I wanted it to be you,” she blurted, then flushed. “I mean... can I tell you something embarrassing?” She

didn't wait for him to answer, feeling willingly vulnerable after the sweet moment they'd shared. "I've had a crush on you since like last year."

Mike's mouth opened in surprised, eyebrows flying up and disappearing beneath his mop of dark hair.

And then he started *laughing*.

A bolt of insecurity filled El's chest with dread and she bit her lip, looking away, shrinking down. It was stupid, she'd always known that, but she had thought that after all the kindness and understanding he'd shown so far, he'd be able to understand this too. Tears blurred her vision as she stared down at the blanket, feeling like an idiot.

Hands cupped her cheeks bringing her up again and the laughter was still there on his face but covered with concern. His thumb stroked away a tear that had fallen down her cheek and he shook his head quickly.

"No, no, El, I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you, I promise. It's just that..." His hands fell and he ducked his head, clearly embarrassed. "I've had a thing for you for like *ever* and now I know if I'd just pulled my head out of my ass and asked you out months ago..." He grinned. "I'm laughing because *I'm* an idiot, okay? You are so amazing and wonderful and beautiful... I'm sorry I was too much of a wimp to tell you before now."

El felt like the air had just been knocked right out of her lungs, jaw dropping. "Wha—*What?*"

"Yeah, fuck, this sounds so stupid but like... we had a class together. Like two years ago."

"What?!" It was the only word she could manage.

"Intro to Psych, I sat in behind you in the amphitheater, kind of on your left? You probably didn't notice me. You were really quiet."

She was still gaping, racking her brain, trying to remember that class and who had been in it. It had been one of her first classes, without

Max, and she'd been nervous and quiet and kept to herself. She couldn't even remember what amphitheater it had been in, it had been that dull.

"I... don't remember anything about that class," she admitted.

"It was pretty boring, the professor had that monotone voice, yeah. But you lent me a pen once..."

A vague memory appeared at that, of a quiet, masculine voice apologizing and asking for a pen. It had been the first time anyone had talked to her in that class and she'd been so flustered and nervous she'd just shoved the one in her hand right over her shoulder to the mystery person. She hadn't let it register that it had been her only pen.

"...and it wasn't until after I took it that I realized it was your only pen. But the thing is, I'd sort of already thought you were super cute and I didn't know how to talk to you and I was too embarrassed to give it back."

"You thought I was cute?" she gasped.

"Yeah. Um, you are *super* cute, El. Like really pretty," he explained seriously, cheeks a lovely shade of red. "Everytime you came into the Quarry... I *lived* for eleven o'clock."

It was too much, all at once.

He had liked her first? Because she'd given him a pen? And he thought she was cute—no, *pretty*?

The kiss had electrified her, but this was like running headfirst into a brick wall.

All the months of longing and pining and wishing and daydreaming... and he'd been doing the same thing from the other side of the counter. Thinking about *her*. Wanting *her*.

A laugh bubbled out of her throat and she covered her mouth with her hands automatically, eyes widening. He was right... it was *hilarious*.

He looked dumbstruck for a second, and then he snorted before his own laughter escaped and then they were *both* laughing, at how stupid it was, for waiting for so long. The irony was impossible to ignore and El let the hilarity come out as she snickered and chortled and gasped, tears in her eyes. There was an edge of relief too, that kept the giggles coming. It was all so stupid because he'd just kissed her and it had been the most amazing thing and it could have happened sooner but it didn't matter now.

When they finally calmed down enough to speak again, panting and gasping and wiping their eyes, El let herself grin at him, the insecurity completely gone, their shared moment of mirth and relief—and, oh, yeah, that *kis*—had totally blasted away the last of her doubts.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything either... I thought I was just your favorite customer. I didn’t think you actually *liked* me,” she confessed. “But I mean, I was hoping inviting you to sleep here would maybe be a clue that I liked *you*. ”

“To be honest, I wanted to kiss you earlier in the hallway but I didn’t want to freak you out if you didn’t like me and make you feel... unsafe, you know?” He shifted a bit, his leg brushing hers. “Not like, in your house. I would have felt so shitty if you weren’t into me and then you had to try and sleep with some creepy weirdo who tried to kiss you like twenty feet away.” His arm, which had been resting next to her, nestled cozily around her waist. “And I can’t tell you how fucking relieved I am right now to not be a creep.”

Her hand fell onto his, pulling his arm closer, and even though she wanted to taste his lips again, she was struck with a sudden shyness, scooting herself closer to simply tuck her head under his chin. She had daydreamed a million scenarios where she had been allowed to be that close, but nothing compared to the actual feeling of her pressing her nose against his throat and snuggling into the front of him.

“I’ve never thought you were a creep.” A contented sigh left her, warming the front of his sweatshirt with her breath. “Literally never.”

“That’s... really awesome to hear. I try not to be but I know men are

terrible and the world is a nightmare so I wouldn't have been upset if you had."

"Mmmno, you gave me too many free muffins. You were never in creep territory to begin with."

"Because of the muffins? I thought maybe the Elevensie would be the kicker."

"Oh, I loved that."

The conversation turned to easy chatting, a bit of teasing, like they used to over their respective counters. The late hour and their closeness made everything so cozy. It only took half an hour for El to feel her eyelids droop, the exhaustion of the day winning over her excitement and the newness of her current position.

He eased them down as he realized she was falling asleep, until they were totally horizontal on the creaky pull-out mattress. His long arm just reached the lamp on the end table and he flicked it off, the only source of light coming from the soft glow of her fairy lights, in her room behind them. It was quiet and still, the air chilled, the only sound their soft breathing as they fell asleep there, wrapped in blankets and each other's arms.

&&&&

Mike was having the best dream. He was cozied up in a pile of blankets in a chilly room, the barest hint of light gently glowing over the scene before him.

It was her, Eleven, the girl who had been so quiet but selflessly gave him her only pen. The same one who would appear occasionally on campus, chin tucked into her scarf as she made her way to her next class. He hadn't been able to pretend she wasn't incredibly pretty, with chocolate curls that tangled around her head, sometimes tied up in a scrunchie, and the most devastatingly beautiful eyes, like a matcha latte drizzled with honey, earthy and bright and warm.

But she was quiet, and he was awkward when it came to one-on-one interaction outside of the Quarry. *Especially* with cute girls.

He couldn't talk to her. He didn't know how. The only reason he'd had a girlfriend in high school was because some girl had asked him to prom and then told him he was her boyfriend and had stolen his first kiss before he'd really had time to think. He'd barely talked to her, and the experience hadn't really given him much knowledge on where to start.

But Eleven, she made him *think* about trying which was more than the entire campus of girls had done during his previous two years there. She wasn't exactly special, but somehow he just felt drawn to her, even if he couldn't find the courage to do more than glance her way when she appeared.

And then she'd started coming in to the Quarry, on a schedule, and somehow his own seemed to revolve around making sure he was working when his calculator watch beeped eleven o'clock. It was the only time he had a reason to talk to her, and when he was working he always felt a little more at ease with people since he had something to *do* . But every time she walked in, he would get distracted. She just lit up the whole shop, her shy smile as she dropped her change into the Jedi side of the tip jar, the way her eyes scrunched up happily as she sipped her drink, the little wave she gave before she left.

Despite telling himself it was stupid to like someone so out of his league—which was a cop-out but just felt so true—the crush had fostered and grown and when she'd come in and mentioned Pippin and the bookstore, his curiosity had gotten the better of him. To be fair, Mirkwood Books was exactly the sort of place he would have loved regardless of the cute girl that sat behind the counter, but it was a pretty good motivator to do his studying there instead of at home.

So, staring down at the sleeping face of the girl that he'd been trying to get the courage to ask out for months, he was convinced he was dreaming. It was the only explanation.

At least it's a good dream, he sighed.

He gently cupped her cheek with his hand, she felt so *real*, letting his thumb stroke across chin, tracing the shape of her bottom lip, silky

like a rose petal.

Her lips... wait.

He almost jolted upright as the memory of feeling those lips pressed against his struck like lightning.

This isn't a dream.

The past few hours came to him, falling asleep at the bookstore, the grim determination as he stared out at the snow-filled street, knowing it would be a freezing walk home. The surprise at her invitation and the thrill at her friendliness. He'd, at most, hoped that maybe they'd be able to establish an actual friendship. If he could survive a night at her apartment without being creepy or weird, then that could at least make him feel better about asking her out later on.

He hadn't imagined for even a second that she would end up sitting across from him, sharing warmth in a cold room, opening up to him about the seriousness of her past and who she was. It had taken a lot for her share that with him and that alone had made him feel incredibly... special. It meant she trusted him, something she kept telling him and showing him, something that he hadn't expected to be given so soon.

She was so small and innocent and *vulnerable*, but knowing how she'd gone through so much as a kid, he knew she had a strength there too. It was beautiful and honest and ridiculously attractive to him.

Maybe that would annoy someone else, how tentative she could be, how inexperienced and embarrassed she was. But now he knew the truth behind it, why she had been so quiet and subdued when she came in to get her chai. Why she'd barely looked at him when they'd had that class. The truth of her past explained why she was the way she was, and it didn't bother him.

It just made him want to show her *more*. All the things she wasn't given as a child, all the things she was afraid of now. If he could be the one thing she could rely on... nothing would make him happier.

She'd let him be her first kiss and that had been such an amazing

feeling, knowing she wanted *him*. There were so many firsts he could share with her, that he could show her, and tomorrow... tomorrow could be the beginning of that. Tomorrow he would start with a simple question, something about dinner and a movie, maybe. She had mentioned she liked movies.

And maybe that question could lead to the next one, the one where he would promise that she would be special to him, where he would move up from a friend to something more.

And past that... well, there were plenty of firsts they could figure out from there.

His hand gently stroked her pile of chocolate curls that were tangled across her face before tucking them behind her ear, so silky-soft. A contented sigh escaped her lips and she shifted just barely, tucking closer to him, absolutely angelic. There was no doubt in his mind that he would be happy if she fell asleep on his chest every night for the rest of his life.

His watch, laying on the end table, beeped, signaling the late hour. The realization of how late it was combined with the coziness of the situation and his desire to let her sleep made his eyelids droop. He was so excited for what the next day held, but laying there, looking down at the sleeping girl on his chest, he decided he was happy to just be there in that moment.

Tomorrow would come soon enough. For now, he had *her*, wanting to be there with *him*, and that was enough. More than enough.

Smiling down at her, he let his hand rest on her back, sighing before moving just enough to press a single, feather-soft kiss to her forehead. She was imperfect and messy, small and needy, but somehow she *was* perfect.

Taking in the sight of her one last time, he let out a happy breath, a silken-spun billow in the chilly room, murmuring to her the thing she'd said to him every night the past months, that had always filled with him a quiet certainty.

It wasn't a goodbye this time. No, this time... it was a promise.

“Goodnight, El.”

Notes for the Chapter:

this felt right and i'm glad i listened to my gut. i really do hope you like it, i know maybe the song has a slightly more sexual vibe to it, but i wanted to capture that dreamy longing feeling in it more than that.

i feel like i deserve to know if you liked it so drop me comment please. i know i don't reply because honestly, i get overwhelmed, but i love each one and read them all.

on another note, i do have an instagram that i'm sortof okay with sharing. it's private but if you want to follow, i post some mileven stuff and talk about what i'm writing. i posted a few pictures of the bookstore that inspired this story! just shoot me a dm and let me know you're from here and i'll add you. i get socially exhausted pretty easily so i can't promise i'll always be up for chatting, but i'll give it a try

thanks for humoring this odd little blurb. i need to get back to work on my other stories (finish burn?? what do you mean?!) but i really loved this idea and it was fun to write. mike and el are always fun, i can't imagine tiring of them.

hope to you see soon!

-g